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TAGS: PHUM PREF PREL TH LA
SUBJECT: LAO AMBASSADOR SEES LITTLE INTERNATIONAL ROLE ON
LAO HMONG IN THAILAND

REF: A. BANGKOK 2041
B. BANGKOK 2042

Classified By: Douglas M. Griffiths, Charg d,Affaires, a.i., for
reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment: In a meeting with the Charg, Lao Ambassador to the UN Yong , expressed a willingness to have IOM play some role in resettling the Lao Hmong in Thailand, but made it clear that the return of Lao Hmong was a bilateral matter between Thailand and Laos and that any international organization role will be informal. The Charg encouraged Yong to continue to improve GOL transparency on resettlement and pressed that an IOM role verifying that returns are voluntary and returnees well treated back in Laos would be the best means of countering "misinformation" that Yong complained was flowing from the Hmong and activist community in the US. We did not have to scratch deep to encounter familiar GOL resistance to any international role, but there are points still worth exploring and Yong expressed a genuine desire to engage. End Summary and Content

¶2. (SBU) The Charg used a courtesy call on Lao ambassador Young Chanthalangsy to follow-up on PRM PDAS Witten,s recent visit to Laos and Thailand to discuss Lao Hmong in Thailand. He was accompanied by RMA Counselor. Noting improving US-Lao relations, the Charg stressed that we would like to help find a solution to the situation of the Lao Hmong that was acceptable to everyone. He acknowledged GOL efforts regarding increased transparency and international monitoring of Lao Hmong returnees from Petchabun, Thailand, and encouraged further steps, such as allowing the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to provide some sort of assistance once they return to Laos as well. Pointing to high-level USG and Congressional interest, the Charg stated that such steps would reassure the international community that Hmong are not being mistreated upon return to Laos. End summary and comment.

Process must be bilateral

¶3. (SBU) Yong agreed that US-Lao ties have been on an upward trend for a couple of years now, referring to increased mil-mil contact, assistance with unexploded ordinance and drug trafficking as clear examples of the improvement. The Lao Hmong issue is the only negative element in the relationship, he continued. Yong said the GOL greatly appreciated PDAS Witten,s very clear message to the Hmong in Petchabun that the US had no plans to resettle them. Many of the Lao Hmong only fled to Petchabun out of a belief that they would get third-country resettlement, often misled by misinformation coming from the Hmong community and some other activists in the US according to Yong (he handed over a compilation of wire stories as examples). Both the GOL and RTG consider the Hmong in Petchabun to be illegal migrants and plan to implement a bilateral approach to returning them

to Laos, he said.

¶4. (SBU) The Charg responded that the USG was willing to support voluntary returns, but that it would be important to avoid misperceptions and misinformation that might arise. The best way to do that was to include a respected outside organization, such as IOM. If IOM were able to say that the returns were voluntary and returnees were well treated in Laos, this would be the most credible way to respond to detractors.

¶5. (SBU) Mentioning that a second group of Lao Hmong had been repatriated the day before, Yong said that the process envisaged by the GOL and RTG was that IOM could be present at the processing of departures in Petchabun and to the Lao border where they would be handed over to GOL authorities. He said that IOM could even come from the border to "welcome center" in Laos where they would stay for 2-4 weeks while identities were verified and plans made for their return to home villages in 90 percent of cases or to development villages for those with no family or village ties. RMA Counselor noted that IOM did not yet have a formal agreement with either the RTG or GOL for any of this work and asked whether they would also be allowed to visit returnees periodically in Laos. He stated that the USG would be prepared to finance such work by IOM.

¶6. (SBU) Yong reverted to familiar Lao policy lines by stating that the sine qua non for the GOL and the RTG was to not make an international issue out of the Lao Hmong. This must be handled through bilateral channels and any role for international organizations would be informal. The best thing the US can do is to facilitate the returns, at which point the GOL will become more and more open. The government can organize informal (read non-official) visits to

returnees. Moving onto the question of resettlement, Yong said that whatever country wishes to take Lao Hmong is free to do so. The GOL condition is that they return to Laos and go through the processing mentioned above first.

Nong Khai Killers

¶7. (C) Finally, Yong turned to the 158 Lao Hmong who have received UNHCR status and are being held in Nong Khai. He said that the GOL would also accept the resettlement of those individuals under the same conditions mentioned above. He then stated that UNHCR had created a problem with these individuals as some are criminals and engaged in killings in Laos. In fact, several individuals were even responsible for the killings of foreigners, in particular the two Swiss citizens killed in 2004, led by the current leader of the group in Nong Khai. In an ominous tone, Yong then explained that this was why some of those returned to development houses would need "a long period of healing" and would actually require GOL protection from retribution. Since the GOL has not wanted to internationalize this situation, it has refrained from sharing this "bombshell" about the involvement in killings to others, as it would not want to see these individuals pursued by other countries. This is why you need to understand, he concluded, that we cannot open up completely on this matter.

Comment

¶8. (C) Yong was responsible for handling the Lao Hmong file in Vientiane before coming to Geneva this spring. By all accounts, he continues to be influential on the matter. While his initial comments were encouraging, as we scratched deeper, it became clear that there is a long row to hoe between here and agreement on a process. However, he demonstrated a clear willingness to engage further.

GRIFFITHS